

When Pax Sinica comes up against Pax Americana

China is prepared to play a long game to achieve its goal as a co-equal to the West, and it will get there.

Ho Kwon Ping

The Bloomberg New Economy Forum is being held against the gathering clouds of much more than a tropical storm or a Beijing winter. Climate change of a geopolitical nature is worsening.

What once was an American policy of constructive engagement which then became strategic rivalry is now almost active containment of China. Whether it be near-collisions of warships, or threats of a trade war, or allegations of electoral interference, examples abound of a more aggressive US stance to block what is seen as China's potentially irreversible ascendancy.

But tensions today cannot just be seen through the Cold War lenses of superpower competition for dominance.

No doubt, Cold War analysts note that within two decades, China's total economy will be one-third larger than the US economy, but with a lot more room for growth as per capita income will still be less than half that of the US. Others warn that Chinese military spending is currently double that of Russia and two-thirds that of the US, and will reach parity before the middle of this century.

However, a containment strategy towards China may be too little, too late. China sees this crisis exactly as the word is written in Chinese.

Weiji is a combination of the words for danger and opportunity: an inflection point. To them, US President Donald Trump is neither an aberration nor an enemy; he reflects a historic inflection point, when America's turning away from its post-war global role coincides with China's stepping onto the

centre stage of history.

Whereas a few decades ago China heeded its late leader Deng Xiaoping's guidance to keep a low profile, there is an almost unanimous view, not only among the leadership but the entire nation, that this current crisis must be faced frontally. China's ascendancy – not just economic or even geopolitical, but civilisational in its breadth and depth – has been thwarted for two centuries by colonial humiliation, and cannot be further blocked.

If a sense of manifest destiny resonated for Americans two centuries ago during their country's ascendancy to what eventually became global dominance, in China there is an equally palpable sense of destiny that it will soon be an advanced civilisation no less equal to the Western world, and it will not be compelled to play by the rules continually created by the West to China's detriment.

And that is why Made in China 2025 is not just bombastic propaganda, but an extremely ambitious, audacious and yet achievable road map for China to



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attain global rank or even supremacy in critical fields of human endeavour, including artificial intelligence and climate change technologies. This is, to China, its destiny.

So too, is the Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to restore China's connectivity to the world as it had centuries ago. A Pax Americana is not, in the Chinese worldview, a special, God-given order of things due to some American notion of exceptionalism.

To advocates of a world order where the US is the ultimate global peacekeeper and policeman, a new Pax Sinica may sound sinister and, at best, a hidden form of Chinese imperialism. However, to the Chinese, Pax Sinica is a legitimate reversion to its centuries-old, historically validated destiny. There have been previous Pax Sinicas during Han dynasty China about 2,000 years ago, or the Tang 1,000 years later. These were in fact the golden eras in Chinese history, when China was an open, cosmopolitan and enlightened civilisation exercising more soft than hard power to become the dominant player in Asia.

The Chinese point out that even in the centuries of Pax Sinica, China never had territorial ambitions to conquer nations thousands of miles from its borders, unlike the era of European colonialism.

At its worst, Pax Sinica is reflected in the term for China – the Middle Kingdom – which neighbours gave appropriate deference to, and received economic and cultural benefits.

Reclaiming this destiny is the long game China is prepared to play for the rest of this century. And they will get there.

CONCERNED NEIGHBOURS

While a somewhat benign Pax Sinica may well be true, it is not

particularly assuring to many of China's neighbours, who still harbour bitter memories of history.

China will have to convince sceptics that its emergence from the convulsions of the Cultural Revolution will not relapse, that its political governance is stable, responsive and just, and that its status of a global superpower is deserving of the trust and respect of the world. Assurances that a new Pax Sinica will, at minimum, be as benign as American hegemony have to be proven by not just words but also action in coming years.

Since we are moving towards a world of co-equal civilisational tension between East and West, a new type of multilateralism which will no longer resemble the American-led post-war global order should, but has yet to, emerge.

But it is beginning to happen – the historically close but also conflict-riven East Asian states of Korea, Japan and China are beginning to realise that without an unconditional US security umbrella decades from now, they must complete their own rapprochement which was left frozen and unresolved since the last war.

Similarly, the 600 million people who make up South-east Asia are creating linkages which did not exist before. The dynamic middle class and positive demographics of the Asean market are well known to business people, but Asean's possibly strategic role in a world of co-equal civilisations has yet to be realised.

As China's smaller neighbours for thousands of years, Asean has to navigate with skill and subtlety, recognising the reality of being within China's sphere of influence, but without ever surrendering its sovereignty or subordinating its own vital national interests.

In the world of politics and business, the notion of co-equal

civilisations means that the institutions and norms of Wall Street capitalism or Western liberal democracy may no longer be the yardsticks by which Asian societies measure themselves.

The communitarian traditions of East Asia will be increasingly reflected in uniquely Asian forms of capitalism and governance, with no apologies to purely Western norms which are alien to Asia's own historical traditions.

One ramification from the decline in Western liberal democracies is growing confidence by Asian societies to craft, practise, and believe in, their own responses to future challenges, rather than just follow the West.

SINGAPORE'S ROLE

And how will Singapore fit into all these? No doubt, size gives power, and we are small. But perspective gives strategic insights, and we have unique perspectives to guide our principles.

Speaking truth to power; maintaining a constructive neutrality; and adopting policies which are in Asean's, America's, and China's core interests, are some principles which we intend to uphold. Singapore's history as a nation rooted in Asian sensibilities, traditions and culture, but also familiar and comfortable with completely Western norms of behaviour and thinking, gives us a unique sensitivity to the kinds of civilisational tensions which are now happening globally.

Those at the crossroads of civilisations understand best how to interpret shifts in civilisational paradigms. It is in this spirit of deeply understanding, empathising, and yet being constructively honest with the aspirations and anxieties of both the West, as represented by the US, and the East, as represented by China, that Singapore can play an important role far in excess of our population size or our tiny territorial space.

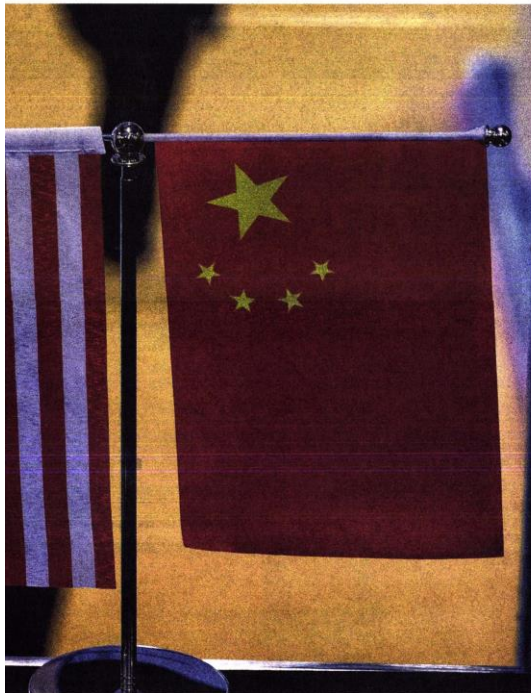
From multilateral governmental meetings to global business conferences and bilateral private summits, Singapore has become popular not just because of our excellent transport and communications infrastructure or our operational efficiency, but above all, our ability to transcend parochial perspectives to be truly global in outlook.

In the New Economy, the truly global cities will play an outsized role. Singapore is already and will continue to be a test bed for smart-city technology and even innovative forms of social behaviour amid changing demographics and good governance rooted in Asian communitarian traditions rather than Western notions of liberal democracy.

In a deeply divided and yet paradoxically increasingly globalised world, the soft power exerted by global cities which can cross that divide will be transformational. It would be audacious for Singapore to aspire to that role, but it is not impossible.

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tion for dominance, the writer says. The world is at a historic inflection point, when
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